



Ahimsā

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The Soul of Buddhism: Mind, Karma, Rebirth, And Buddhist Middle Path Philosophy

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Is there a soul in Buddhism? To give the short answer first: “No.”

As you might expect, the long answer is much more nuanced. The short answer depends on the commonly understood idea of “soul” as an unchanging personal principle that continues in time indefinitely. This is the concept of “soul” usually implicit when one begins with the assumptions of a theistic religion. On the other hand, if we mean simply that human beings have a spiritual aspect that is not ultimately bound up with physical processes, then Buddhism would be much more sympathetic to the idea. Buddhism may deny the existence of a “soul”, but it is not for that reason “soul-less” in the same way as materialist philosophy.

Buddhism is often called the “Middle Path”. This has been explained in different ways in different contexts. The first use of the phrase is found in the Buddha’s very first sermon, in which he laid out the “middle way” between the extremes of asceticism and hedonism. On the metaphysical level, Buddhist doctrine (and more specifically Dependent Origination) has been called the “middle way” between the extreme views of eternalism and annihilationism (*sassata-*

vāda and *ucchedavāda*).

The first sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya* lays out sixty-two false views, or philosophical errors. These make a complex matrix of nuanced positions regarding metaphysical questions, but we can simplify them all into two broad categories (and one additional minor category). The first major category of error is eternalism, or the belief that there are some “things” (such as a soul) that continue essentially unchanged forever. This was represented in the Buddha’s time by all those Indian schools which postulated an eternal *ātman*, the Self or Soul or *jīva*, life-principle. In later times, this philosophy was adopted in some form or another by all theistic religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and most forms of Hinduism.

The belief in an *ātman* or soul in this sense usually goes hand-in-hand with the belief in a Creator God, who is the first, most perfect and most powerful of the “souls”. Sometimes, the soul is seen as a part or a spark of the One Big Soul, as in the Upanishadic idea that *Ātman* equals Brahman. Sometimes, the human soul is seen as a separate entity created by God by an act of will.

Continued on page 3

Contents

The Soul of Buddhism	1
Programs	2
Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship	2
Dhamma Study Group	2
Selections from the <i>Dhammapada</i> :	
5. The Immature	10
6. The Wise	11
Membership	12

Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- Dhamma study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the Dhamma, based primarily on Pali sources.
2. To promote practice of the Dhamma in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the Dhamma, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pali language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Group

There are currently no active programs — the Dhamma study group focusing on the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* by Ācariya Anuruddha has been permanently canceled. Those who may have questions about particular Dhamma topics or about their individual practice are encouraged to contact Allan Bomhard at (843) 720-8531 or by e-mail at bomhard@aol.com. ■

Continued from page 1

There are other variations on this theme. In any case, the idea of a God as First Principle or Creator would seem to be required once we accept the notion of an essential and eternal soul. The question of where these souls come from can only be answered by tracing them back to a first cause. The inquiry must end in an act of creation by a special ontologically privileged great-soul.

The opposite extreme is annihilationism, which is a nearly literal translation of *uccheda-vāda* (the “cutting-off” view). This, in its simplest formulation, is the view that beings are “cut off” at death and utterly cease to exist. In the Buddha’s time, this was represented by various philosophers, who either postulated the existence of a finite “life-principle” or took a hard-materialist line that denied any separate reality apart from the body.

In Western philosophy, this view was developed by some of the Stoics and has never completely died out. Today, in the form of so-called “rationalism” or “philosophical materialism”, it is becoming established as the dominant world-view of the educated classes. On the meta-physical level, it is represented by what is called “physicalism”, the argument that all mental functions are, in the last analysis, dependent on physical processes. As a corollary, this would mean that such processes are also explicable in purely physical terms, i.e., as specific sequences of firing neurons.

Such a view, of course, presupposes atheism; there is neither room nor need for a God in such a philosophy. Likewise, it rejects completely any idea of a life after death and tends to be extremely skeptical about what are called “paranormal phenomena” like telepathy and precognition.

It can be seen that one of the principle differences between these two philosophic tendencies is on the question of the “Great Matter of Life and Death”. One side believes in a separate soul that continues forever, while the other side believes only in physical reality and denies any kind of post-mortem existence. They

would seem to be completely irreconcilable polar opposites, and, in most respects, they are. However, from the point of view of Buddhism, they both share one underlying false assumption.

Before we get to that, it is necessary to explain something of the Buddhist view. Buddhists have made the claim that they are the Middle Path between both of these erroneous extremes and have presented the Master’s doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) as a middle way cutting across the thickets of views. Dependent Origination is a complex study, with many aspects in different contexts. Nevertheless, the core idea is both simple and profound. The general principle of Dependent Origination is that things arise from causes and not otherwise: “This arising, that must be. This ceasing, that must cease”.

Stated baldly like this, it seems almost a truism; but the implications are far-reaching and profound. It is a radical statement of the lawful nature of the universe. It says that there are no exceptions to the Laws of Cause and Effect. (This is not a complete statement, as we will see later when we consider the very special case of the Unconditioned.)

We will have much more to say about this axiom of Buddhism, but first let us make a note that both of the extreme views, as opposite in most respects as day and night, share this salient characteristic: they ultimately deny cause and effect and fall back on arbitrariness. In the eternalist view, the chain of cause and effect is explicitly traced back to a First Cause, a *Primum Mobile*, which is, in most formulations, some version of a Creator God who creates by an act of arbitrary will. The final answer as to why the universe is the way it is and not otherwise is that God did it that way.

The materialist or annihilationist view also falls back on an arbitrary principle, as it ultimately rests on arbitrariness. Things are this way just because that is the way things are. The ultimately arbitrary nature of this view is seen in many instances. In the Big Bang model of the universe, for instance, there is an outstanding problem of “broken symmetry”. The universe did not

continue to expand into a universally diffuse soup of particles as would be expected by a strict application of cause and effect, instead, the initial symmetry was somehow randomly (arbitrarily) broken and matter “clumped” into galaxies, stars, and planets.

As an historical aside, Western science has always had an uncomfortable relationship with this arbitrary principle. The entire intellectual basis of science is predicated on seeking and explaining the laws of cause and effect. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, most scientists were comfortable with falling back on divine creation as the ultimate arbitrary first cause. Newton, for example, was very much a creationist and even maintained that God would intervene from time to time to keep the planets in their orbits, which we now know are actually chaotic, i.e., extremely complex non-repeating patterns, neither random nor regular.

It was only with the advent of quantum mechanics that creationism was explicitly replaced by randomness. In fact, some thinkers today use quantum mechanics to justify the idea that the universe is inherently random. For instance, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle maintains that certain fundamental quantities are inherently unpredictable, which is not at all to say that they arise without cause and condition. Most of the metaphysical arguments from quantum mechanics confuse the laws of quantum physics with their various interpretations. The former are mathematical, rigorous, and experimentally verifiable, while the latter are philosophical attempts to explain how the universe might work according to those laws. We will have a little more to say about quantum mechanics in relation to the topic of the nature of Mind.

To recap the argument so far, we can divide the world of metaphysical thought into (1) that camp which believes that sentient beings are possessed of an immortal soul created by the arbitrary will of a God and (2) those who believe that sentient beings are nothing more than a complex arrangement of molecules arisen in the last analysis by pure chance. In the middle of

these extremes, we have the third camp, the Buddhists, who believe that beings arise according to the laws of cause and effect and deny that there is any arbitrary or random aspect whatsoever.

The Buddhist writer and translator, Maurice O’C. Walshe, once came up with a very evocative metaphor for this situation. He said that the Buddhist Middle Way was like an island in the middle of a round lake. There is an optical illusion such that, from either shore, the island always appears closer to the further shore. Likewise, to the eternalist, Buddhism must always seem hopelessly nihilistic in its denial of Soul and God. This is, in fact, the argument presented by the official Vatican theologians against Buddhism. On the other hand, a modern, scientifically minded atheist looks at Buddhism as being hopelessly mystical with its talk of *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*), rebirth, other realms of existence, and so forth. To the atheist, the island appears just a short passage from the eternalist shore.

Before proceeding to an attempt to develop the implications of the Buddhist idea of Dependent Origination, we should tie up one loose end. The alert reader may have noticed that I mentioned a third minor category of false view that does not fit neatly into the two broader camps. I was referring to the “eel-wiggler’s” view (literal translation). This is the view of the person so caught up in the hindrance of skeptical doubt that they are unable to take a position anywhere around the lake or on the island but end up flopping around in the lake like eels. Nowadays, this position attempts to gain some respectability by calling itself “agnostic”. The Buddha was quite dismissive of this position in the Brahmajāla Sutta (the first sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*). He characterized them as saying, “I don’t say this, I don’t say that, and I don’t say the other thing,” and put their position down to either stupidity or cowardice.

Nowadays, there is a strong movement towards an “agnostic Buddhism”, which retains extreme skepticism toward such doctrines as *kamma* and rebirth. The proponents of this position justify it with very selective quotations from the suttas. In particular, the Kālāma Sutta is often cited, which

says, in part, that one should not subscribe to a view because of tradition or hearsay (and also because of having “hammered it out with reason”, although this is less often cited). However, if we read the sutta through to the end, the Buddha lists reasons by which we should subscribe to a view: (1) if we find that it contributes to our spiritual growth and (2) if it is commended by the wise.

This is significant, because Buddhism is first and foremost practical. It takes its stand less on metaphysical truth (although that should not be downplayed) and more on the practical means of transcending suffering. Agnosticism fails in this because it give one no place to stand. Skeptical doubt is listed as a hindrance and compared to wandering in a desert without a map. More could be said on this topic, which is not unimportant, but, to return to our main theme — having discussed the two main polar views —, we must now turn to the Buddhist middle position.

We have seen that the primary metaphysical axiom of Buddhism is that things arise according to causes and conditions and not otherwise. I do not know if it is possible to establish this point with absolute philosophical rigor or not. It does seem to me to be intuitively true, and I do not know of any unimpeachable counter-examples. (I have already said that so-called “quantum randomness” does not qualify since that is not a statement of fact but just one possible interpretation of the data. Again, I would like to defer this point until we get to the topic of Mind.)

It is a trivial observation to say that the universe is mostly lawful, that is, subject to cause and effect. That is why science is possible at all. Two atoms of hydrogen joined to one atom of oxygen always make water (H₂O) and never gold or silicon. However, the Buddhist principle goes much further than this and makes the strong claim that everything arises according to causes. There is no random arising, nor random cessation.

Consider a universe where this were not so. There would be a fundamental underlying meaninglessness and, on the human level, a final hopelessness. Since Buddhism is a practical philosophy, and also a hopeful one, it cannot take its

basis on such a view of the universe. We need to start our inquiry somewhere, and this point needs to be taken as axiomatic for the rest of my argument to make sense. If you cannot follow me this far, the rest of what I have to say will not be convincing.

Another way of saying this is to restate the First Noble Truth and its associated task. The Buddha said that this existence is marked with suffering (*dukkha*) and that we should, and can, understand it. He would not have given us the charge to understand it (*dukkha* being, in the final analysis, all conditioned reality) if it were not understandable — if he had not himself understood it. Moreover, it could not be understood if it were random or arbitrary. So again, the whole teaching turns on this single point.

Now it is necessary to make another longish digression, to establish what Buddhism says about the nature of Mind, before we can apply this axiomatic rule of causation.

The nature of Mind is, of course, a central concern of Buddhism. Many of the texts and traditions can seem very mystical or cryptic, but, if we turn to a very early attempt at intellectual rigor, the *Abhidhamma*, we can get some clear principles established to work with. *Abhidhamma* is a collection of texts from a very early phase of Buddhist thought. Traditionally, the core passages, the *mātikā*, are attributed to the Buddha himself. Modern scholarship casts doubt on this tradition, but no one disputes that the *Abhidhamma* is very ancient. In structure and method, they are very precise and internally consistent texts, which classify the elements of body and mind and their relationships.

The *Abhidhamma* recognizes four basic categories of reality: *rūpa*, *citta*, *cetasika*, and *nibbāna*; that is, in English, body, materiality, or physical matter (*rūpa*); mind *per se* or consciousness (*citta*); concomitant mental factors (*cetasika*), arising with consciousness like thought or memory, etc.; and, finally, *sui generis* (literally, of its own kind; an idea that cannot be included in a wider concept), *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), the unconditioned, a special class outside the rest.

Leaving the last aside for now, it is important to understand that each of the other three can be considered as ontologically primitive categories. That is to say, each has its own irreducible reality. Consciousness, for example, can be explained neither in terms of matter nor vice-versa. The elements of each class may act upon each other in some circumstances. If it is cold in the room where I am sitting, the physical reality may be one causal factor in my mental feeling of distress. Nevertheless, for that feeling to exist at all cannot be explained solely in physical terms.

This position may require some justification. These days, one of the dominant paradigms is the computational model of mind. This maintains that mind is a secondary phenomenon derived from purely physical processes in the brain. This model has strong appeal because, as a culture, we are so fascinated with our own creation, the electronic computer, and the way it can appear to mimic many mental functions.

Thick books have been written on both sides of this debate, which shows no sign of going away. Personally, I believe it can be refuted by a few moments of honest introspection. Consider the simple fact of “knowing”. Not the process of knowing any *thing* in particular, but the raw fact of just knowing in and of itself. All our perceptions and imaginations can be analyzed into a process of sense organ, nerves, and neurons, but they all end up at this irreducible pristine simplicity. There is something at the end of the chain that “just knows”. This immediate knowing, consciousness *per se*, is so simple, immediate, and uncompounded that it cannot be explained in terms of any algorithm (step by step process).

This last is of critical importance. If consciousness were a result of physical processes, we should be able (at least in theory) to replicate it step by step. It would need to be algorithmic. This is especially and obviously true for any computational model of mind. Any computational process can, in theory, be reduced to a series of simple and linear programming commands (the concept of the Turing machine). There is simply no way to program something that is, in itself,

immediate and perfectly simple. Consciousness does not make sense unless it is considered *sui generis*.

This way of understanding Mind should not be confused with what Western philosophy calls “substance dualism” or the “ghost in the machine”. That is the eternalist soul view all dressed up for polite company. It is also, paradoxically, a sort of materialism. It assumes that there must be some “stuff” to comprise the mind. Buddhism denies this. Mind is void.

We are trapped here by our own linguistic limitations. We are forced to use nouns like “mind” and “consciousness” to talk about this at all. However, nouns subtly imply some *thing*. Mind is not a thing at all. It would be better to use gerunds like “knowing” exclusively if that did not trip us up in hopeless circumlocutions. Better, as the Buddha advised, to use the conventions of speech but not to be fooled by them.

So, Mind, in the Buddhist understanding, is a separate irreducible class separate from body (and from mental concomitants, but we need not digress that far from the main line of argument). It is, however, causally arisen and conditioned. In other words, subject to cause and effect like everything else. It is also, most of the time, intimately bound up with a physical body, which can act as one of the causal factors. Fill the bloodstream with alcohol, and the conscious mind is dulled and bewildered because its physical correlate is not functioning normally. Likewise, mind can be a causal factor on the body, and, every time we move our limbs, we demonstrate this.

One of the principal themes of *Abhidhamma* is an analysis of how specific mind-moments succeed each other in a causal chain. This is an application of the law of impermanence (*anicca*), or the momentary nature of reality. Each moment, consciousness arises to take an object. The process then repeats itself again and again *ad infinitum* in very specific patterns, which constitute the process of perception and thought.

Now, each individual mind-moment of consciousness has a network of causes. It does not arise randomly. These can include the physical

condition of the body, external sense data, or internal mental concomitants. It always includes, as a necessary cause, the previous moment of consciousness. For example, I am watching an LCD screen as I type this. I may watch the screen for many subsequent moments, the previous moments and their objects conditioning the next arising consciousness to alight on the same or on an adjacent object.

Mind, then, is momentary, unitary, void, and subject to causes and conditions. A moment of consciousness, like everything else, cannot arise without causes, cannot arise just randomly. This would violate the axiomatic rule of dependent arising. It would also constitute a case of creation *ex nihilo*, which is an extreme example of the arbitrary principle we have rejected.

This brings us to the very important topic of rebirth. It is sometimes seen as a contradiction that Buddhism teaches void nature (*anattā* or no-self) and yet maintains rebirth as a reality. If you have followed my reasoning so far, the next step is to establish that rebirth is a necessary consequence of the principle of causality.

This is because the first moment of consciousness in a being in the womb also cannot be a creation *ex nihilo*. It must arise from prior causes, which must include a previous moment of consciousness. The seeming paradox that there is a rebirth but nothing is reborn arises from a misconception about this very life. Nothing, in fact, continues from moment to moment in the course of an ordinary day. It is just a causally connected series of mind-moments arising to various objects.

What occurs at death is different only in that the physical base, the body (*kāya*), is no longer functional, so the mind seeking an object is forced to re-arise elsewhere, with a new form as determined by its *kamma*.

Dependent Origination describes how this process occurs in some detail. This is a list of twelve *nidānas* or links, which demonstrate the specific playing out of the universal law of cause and effect in the case of sentient beings. It is said to be a description of “how this whole mass of

suffering comes to be”.

The first link listed (for purposes of discussion only, the process is cyclic — there is no “first cause” in Buddhism) is ignorance (*avijjā*). Since the mind is ignorant of higher reality, it takes action in the world, which is *kamma* formation, the second link.

It is worthwhile at this point to say something about *kamma* (Sanskrit *karma*). *Kamma*, in Buddhism, means “volitional action”. It is best understood at the level of mind-moments. Each moment, the unenlightened mind makes choices, volitional determinations, which cause fresh *kamma* to be created. This inevitably leads the mind, at some later point, to experience sense impressions that accord with its accumulated *kamma*. Another way of putting this is that the creation of fresh *kamma* causes an imbalance that is later righted by *vipāka*, the *result* of wholesome or unwholesome volitional action (*kamma*) done through body, speech, or mind, either in this or some previous life. *Vipāka* (or *kamma-vipāka*) refers exclusively to the morally neutral *mental phenomena* resulting from *kamma*. *Kamma*-produced corporeal things are never called *vipāka*.

Put crudely, if one does good deeds, one receives happy results, and, if one does bad deeds, one receives unhappy results. This is the law of *kamma* expressed on a macro level. It is just this formulation that is commonly understood when most people talk about *kamma*. If we stop there, it invites the criticism from skeptics that no mechanism is specified, and the whole thing seems a hopelessly mystical basis for ethics.

However, if we examine what is happening at the micro level of mind-moments, then *kamma* makes sense as a close analog to the conservation laws in the physical realm. The law of conservation of momentum, for instance, determines that momentum is always conserved, and, if it is affected in one part of a closed system, another part will compensate. This is seen in the behavior of billiard balls, for example. If one ball equally strikes two others, each travels away with one-half of the momentum of the initial ball. The universe has a strong disposition to seek balance, every

negative always finds a compensating positive.

We have already seen that Mind must be considered as a separate category, separate from but inter-reactive with body. If this is true, then there is no reason why it should not be subject to laws analogous to the physical, but within its own realm. This is *kamma*. It plays out as real results in the physical world because the realms of mind and matter do inter-react.

This action of resultant *kamma* taking the form of physical phenomena is also difficult for skeptics to accept. However, the idea that matter is always primary is nothing but an unfounded assumption. From a purely experiential perspective, it is, in fact, absurd. Mind is, in actuality, the only thing we can ever know directly. Everything else, including our own bodies, is mediated through the sense organs and the perception and consciousness factors of the Mind. To assume that that which is only indirectly known must be primary to that which is immediately known is a strange idea indeed.

To get back to our summary of how rebirth works according to Dependent Origination: with these karmic formations as a conditioning factor, consciousness arises. In the special case of rebirth linking, it arises in the womb or other vessel (such as an egg in the case of some animals) appropriate to it. This happens as a strict, logical necessity given the nature of mind and *kamma* outlined above. The mind has assumed a karmic debt, and this must be repaid, or the law of cause and effect is violated. Balance must be restored.

Kamma is not the only conditioning factor: the force of desire, which is always present in the unenlightened mind, is another. This is the basis of the Second Noble Truth, that desire is the cause of “this whole mass of suffering (*dukkha*)”. It is also explained more fully in the later propositions of Dependent Origination (*contact gives rise to feeling, feeling to craving, craving to clinging, clinging to becoming, becoming to birth*).

This force of desire can be directly observed in the mind during Insight Meditation (*vipassanā*). It can be seen for oneself that, at each moment, the mind seeks an object. There is an inherent greediness

for objects in the unenlightened mind — this can be said to be the primal addiction.

At death, the mind still seeks an object, but, to fulfill this desire, the old vehicle is no longer useful, so it must arise elsewhere.

In brief, driven by *kamma* and desire, the mind seeks a new form. The newly arisen consciousness in a womb thus has antecedents. It did not, indeed could not, arise without such prior causal factors. To believe that each birth is a newly created consciousness is only possible if we introduce arbitrary factors like a Creator God (an irrelevant and unnecessary concept according to Buddhism).

An important caveat needs to be added here. Remember that we should not be fooled by the use of nouns into thinking of consciousness as a “thing”. Specifically, we should not imagine that there is any *thing* at all that transmigrates. The Buddha was quite emphatic in denying this. Rebirth is best thought of as “consciousness arising again to like conditions”. The *Milindapanha* (*Milinda’s Questions*) compares it to an echo, neither the same nor different from the original voice.

I promised earlier to return to the question of the supposed randomness of quantum mechanics. The strongest case for this would seem to be in the description of reality as “probability functions”. For example, we cannot predict exactly the location of an electron, only describe mathematically its probability sphere. When an observation is made, however, the electron does have a specific location, somewhere in the sphere according to its probabilities.

To make up a grossly simplified example, say the electron could be at location A or location B with 50% probability for each. When we make an observation, it “collapses” to either A or B, and this seems to be utterly random.

However, this leaves out the factor of Mind as a separate causal entity in the universe. The observation is, in fact, the application of Mind into the system, and it is this insertion that forces the electron to have a definite location (“to make up its mind”).

This contribution of Mind to the equation has severely disturbed the scientists, most of whom are physicalists. To avoid allowing for what seems to be the simplest explanation, they have been forced either to resort to the arbitrary application of blind chance or to seek explanations that are even more fanciful. Most scientists have, however, shared an aversion to the idea of randomness. The best known attempt to avoid allowing Mind a causative role and, at the same time, preserving causality, has been the “Many Worlds” hypothesis. This says that the electron appears at both A and B in separate universes! This hypothesis has been great for spawning science fiction yarns but is mind-bogglingly inelegant compared to just allowing Mind its rightful place. The eminent American physicist John Wheeler, it may be noted, is an exception here. He has been working on the idea that human consciousness shapes not only the present but the past as well. Another exception worth mentioning is the psychologist Stanislav Grof, who has come to the realization that consciousness is a basic constituent of reality. And there are others.

It should be noted in passing that this role of the observer (Mind) in collapsing the probabilities could also be the underlying mechanism for *kamma* unfolding in the world. It might be that the universe exists as a wealth of variously probable potentials and that these only actualize when mind alights on one or the other according to its desire and its *kamma*.

Some other outstanding problems in science might possibly be solved if Mind were accepted as a separate causal reality. The initial broken symmetry, mentioned above, might be the effect of the cumulative *kamma* of beings from a prior universe.

To get somewhat speculative, I think Mind might have a very deep structural role in the entire unfolding of form in the world. Mind, driven by desire, is always seeking objects and physical forms to access those objects from. It might have a powerful creative role in manifesting the whole physical reality.

The creationists have mounted a concerted

effort to find flaws in the dominant paradigm of evolution. While most of what they have to say is nonsensical, they do raise a few seemingly valid points. Existing evolutionary theory maintains that organisms evolve by small random mutations, which are then selected for by competition for survival. This works very well for things like the giraffe’s neck. The giraffe with the longest neck will find more leaves to eat and will, thus, have a better chance to leave offspring. However, the creationists have raised the objection that this does not explain how complex organs like the eye could arise in the first place. Each interconnected part of the eye needs to be adapted to every other part. A random mutation could only improve vision if all connected parts (rod, optic nerve, lens, etc.) mutated together in harmony.

Random mutation does not appear to offer a complete explanation here. However, where the creationists miss the boat is that the fossil record unequivocally indicates that organisms do indeed evolve over time. Evolution is an established fact, but the accepted theories proposed to explain evolution are not yet sufficient in all details. Here again, a positive role for Mind as an underlying creative force could be another causal factor contributing to a more complete explanation.

This might work through the unfolding of embryonic form. This is another possible gap in scientific understanding. The maverick biologist Rupert Sheldrake points this out brilliantly in his book *New Science of Life* and in other books. We now know quite a lot about DNA and its functioning, but, as Sheldrake has pointed out, the only DNA mechanism demonstrated by scientists is protein synthesis. DNA seems to be a recipe for making proteins. No coding has ever been found to explain how these proteins combine to make more complex structures like cells or organs in the developing embryo. In fact, the case has been made stronger since Sheldrake first wrote by the discovery that the majority of DNA sequences are pure “junk”. There simply is not enough room in the DNA to specify a complete blueprint for a complex organism.

Sheldrake proposes something that he calls

“Morphogenetic fields” as the repositories of this information. These fields are non-local, that is, not located in space. They change with time in feedback loops with the physical forms, and they determine the unfolding of form in the embryo. This sounds a lot like Mind, which is also non-physical, so not locatable in space, and which can interact with material form and is constantly changing.

These examples should suffice to show that a metaphysics that accords Mind a separate category has the potential to be a more powerful explanatory model than a metaphysics that seeks to reduce everything to matter. It does so, what is more, while avoiding the arbitrariness of a “First Cause” or the reliance on blind chance, which is no explanation whatsoever. Far from being mystical, it is grounded on observable reality. *Vipassanā* is, in fact, experimental spiritual science.

This essay would not be complete without briefly referring to the fourth category specified in *Abhidhamma*, namely, *nibbāna*. This is the *summum bonum* of Buddhism, of course, and it is said to be the Unconditioned element. It is the one factor in the system that is outside the law of causality. Nevertheless, even here, there is a strong consistency. This element, it should be

noted, is neither cause nor effect. It is completely other than conditioned reality. This means that it is not in any way an arbitrary factor inserted into the system to close explanatory gaps. This is in contrast to the God of the Christian theologians, which is said to be a “causeless cause” (as we have seen, an impossible condition).

The reality of the Unconditioned is what makes Buddhism more than a secular philosophy. The other three categories deal with the First Noble Truth, this whole mass of suffering. They can be known. Taken by themselves, they can serve as an explanatory framework for this world we experience, including the primary fact that we do experience it at all. However, *nibbāna* gives us the potential for accessing that which is not this. It is the Third Noble Truth, the end of this whole mass of suffering. ■

Ajahn Punnadhammo was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1955. After graduating from college, he discovered Buddhism and began studying and practicing under the guidance of Kema Ananda at what was then the Arrow River Community Center. In 1990, he went to Thailand, where, in 1992, he received higher ordination in the lineage of Ajahn Chah. Today, he resides at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage near Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada.

Selections from the *Dhammapada*

TRANSLATED BY EKNATH EASWARAN

5. The Immature

60. Long is the night to those who are awake; long is the road to those who are weary. Long is the cycle of birth and death to those who do not know the Dhamma.

61. If you find no one to support you on the spiritual path, walk alone. There is no companionship with the immature.

62. They think, “These children are mine; this wealth is mine.” They cannot even call themselves their own, much less their children or wealth.

63. The immature who know they are immature have a little wisdom. But the immature who look on themselves as wise are utterly foolish.

64. They cannot understand the Dhamma even if they spend their whole life with the wise. How can the spoon know the taste of soup?

65. If the mature spend even a short time with the wise, they will understand Dhamma, just as the tongue knows the taste of soup.

66. The immature are their own enemies, doing selfish deeds which will bring them sorrow.

67. That deed is selfish which brings remorse and suffering in its wake.

68. But good is that deed which brings no remorse, only happiness in its wake.

69. Sweet are selfish deeds to the immature until they see the results; when they see the results, they suffer.

70. Even if they fast month after month, eating with only the tip of a blade of grass, they are not worth a sixteenth part of one who truly understands Dhamma.

71. As fresh milk needs time to curdle, a selfish deed takes time to bring sorrow in its wake. Like fire smoldering under the ashes, slowly does it burn the immature.

72. Even if they pick up a little knowledge, the immature misuse it and break their heads instead of benefiting from it.

73. The immature go after false prestige – precedence of fellow monks, power in the monasteries, and praise from all.

74. “Listen, monks and householders, I can do this; I can do that. I am right and you are wrong.” Thus their pride and passion increase.

75. Choose the path that leads to *nibbāna*; avoid the road to profit and pleasure. Remember this always, O disciples of the Buddha, and strive always for wisdom.

6. The Wise

76. If you see someone wise, who can steer you away from the wrong path, follow that person as you would one who can reveal hidden treasures.

Only good can come out of it.

77. Let them admonish or instruct or restrain you from what is wrong. They will be loved by the good but disliked by the bad.

78. Make friends with those who are good and true, not with those who are bad and false.

79. To follow the Dhamma revealed by the noble ones is to live in joy with a serene mind.

80. As irrigators lead water where they want, as archers make their arrows straight, as carpenters carve wood, the wise shape their minds.

81. As a solid rock cannot be moved by the wind, the wise are not shaken by praise or blame.

82. When they listen to the words of the Dhamma, their minds become calm and clear like the waters of a still lake.

83. Good people keep on walking whatever happens. They do not speak vain words and are the same in good fortune and bad.

84. If one desires neither children nor wealth nor power nor success by unfair means, know such a one to be good, wise, and virtuous.

85. Few are those who reach the other shore; most people keep running up and down this shore.

86. But those who follow the Dhamma, when it has been well taught, will reach the other shore, hard to reach, beyond the power of death.

87–88. They leave darkness behind and follow the light. They give up home and leave pleasure behind. Calling nothing their own, they purify their hearts and rejoice.

89. Well trained in the seven factors of enlightenment, their senses disciplined and free from attachments, they live in freedom, full of light. ■



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